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Reflections on Ireland's education/training policy making-process leading to the National Framework of Qualifications: national and international influences

Thomas Duff

This paper reflects on the various influences, especially from the 1980s, that shaped Ireland's policy direction leading to the National Framework of Qualifications which was launched in 2003. The paper also provides a broad overview on Ireland's economic development especially from the 1960s, citing the influence of higher education and training structures in this regard. Among the matters explored in the paper are: the policy-making process; the national, EU and international influences that shaped the policy direction: 'policy-borrowing' and policy networks; linkages between the political process, employer needs and education/training structures; and the Bologna process. The range of influences is highlighted in the flurry of policy initiatives during the 1990s.

Introduction

From the mid-1980s, Ireland had evolved an extensive tertiary sector – the term most preferred by the OECD for post-school education and training; there was a plethora of awards and awarding bodies. Within this broad scope of tertiary provision, both the EU and the OECD considered that most countries would benefit from a greater coherence within a framework that brings together discrete awards and structures. This would improve the linkages, co-ordination and international recognition of awards to facilitate the mobility of labour. But no country was working from a green field situation: there was an inherited infrastructure where the universities have a tradition of autonomy. International competition and the education and training approaches in other countries also influenced the policy direction in Ireland aimed at improving economic performance.

Because of its size and location on the periphery of Europe, Ireland's social and economic policies are inevitably linked to trends in other countries, which now see education and training as the key to competitiveness, economic success and prosperity (NESC 1993a). The influence of other countries such as Australia, New Zealand (NZ) and the United Kingdom (UK) were significant in shaping Irish policy, even though certain statistics from the time illustrate the scale of differences: their populations – 18m, 3.3m, and 50m; their HE provision – 36 universities; 7 universities, 25 polytechnics and 3 wananga; and, some 140 universities and colleges respectively, compared with Ireland's 3.5m population and 7 universities and 14 Institutes of Technology (ITs).

Industrial expansion and educational change from the 1950s

The publication in 1958 of the *Programme for Economic Expansion* was a key influence in Ireland's development (Chubb 1992, p23). The shift from protectionist to more open policies based on industrial development and trade was a major change in political thinking. Although

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Ireland was not essentially a manufacturing economy, it went through a period of modernization from the 1950s marked by an increasing prominence of industry and urbanisation. At that time almost half of the Irish workforce was engaged in agriculture but by 1990 the figure was 15%. In the decade 1961-70, industrial production grew at an annual rate of 6.6%, matching the best of other industrialized countries and from 1971-80 the annual growth was 4.5%, almost twice the European Community (EC) average. In 1966, the population was half-urban and half-rural and by 1986, two-thirds of the population lived in towns (pp24-25). The government responded to the economic and social developments by establishing a HE Commission in 1960. In parallel with this, two OECD studies were conducted in conjunction with the DES – *Training of Technicians in Ireland* (1964) and *Investment in Education* (1966). The findings resulted in major policy changes. During the late 1950s and 1960s, which saw Ireland on the threshold of considerable economic progress, there was recognition of the need for the provision of HE courses geared towards projected manpower requirements. The *Training of Technicians in Ireland* report found that:

a serious obstacle to industrial expansion is the lack of ... personnel suitably educated and trained so that they can play their parts in the development, management and operation of different kinds of industry. (OECD 1964, p13)

In addressing these needs and having regard to the emerging findings of the *Investment in Education* report, government proposals were announced in 1964 in relation to new colleges. While Dublin and some other urban areas were reasonably well catered for, the shortage of appropriately qualified personnel in the regions was inhibiting the predicted economic expansion. It was evident that there was a need for apprentice and technician courses in regions of the country previously unserved by HE institutions. A Government Steering Committee report recommended the establishment of nine regional technical colleges (RTCs) located in regions already identified to spearhead the industrial expansion (DES 1967, 11). The report was a force in changing the paradigm governing Irish education policy replacing personal development with the human capital paradigm as the institutional rationale for education (O’Sullivan, 1992).

The setting up of the RTCs, combined with the existing Dublin technical colleges, reinforced the two educational traditions of liberal education for the elite and middle class and vocational education for the less well off. International competition and technological development had led to skills shortages in newer industries and a more interventionist approach by government in education and training provision (Heraty and Morley 1998, p90). Henceforth, education in the technological sector – the term used for these colleges – was geared toward manpower requirements. The decade from 1980 was a period of considerable growth in HE in Ireland, in terms of increasing student enrolments and expansion of research and development.

Since the 1960s, competitiveness, economic policy, manpower planning and prosperity were linked in many developed countries to education and training provision through state investment in new institutions over which control was exercised. Ozga (2000, pp9-24) outlines tensions in UK education and training policy-making, contrasting governments seeking to use it for instrumental purposes associated with productivity improvement, and educationalists arguing in favour of its role in contributing to societal and cultural development with the individual at the centre. Education was similarly being re-organised in Australia according to Kenway (1993, p15) to suit “the skill and knowledge required in a post-Fordist society ... of a kind typified by Japan”, and that “underlying these models is the belief that education should perform a utilitarian function

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... [to meet] the requirements of the ... economy ... [and] flexible skills in the workplace ... the instrumental ‘human capital’ rhetoric” (pp22-9).

Human capital and competences

The ‘human capital’ concept as a policy approach is arguably the most distinctive feature of the economic system of the mid-twentieth century (Little 2000, pp286-7). In a NZ context, Fitzsimmons and Peters (1994) express the view that human capital theory is ... the most influential economic theory of education as a twin pillar with industrial training strategy. ‘Human capital’ is central to the OECD’s view of economic development as is illustrated in the following extract from one of its publications:

Knowledge, skills and competencies constitute a vital asset in supporting economic growth and reducing social inequality ... This asset ... often referred to as human capital, [is] ... one key factor in combating high and persistent unemployment and the problems of low pay and poverty. As we move into ‘knowledge-based’ economies the importance of human capital becomes even more significant than ever. (OECD 1999, p3)

In a consideration of the human capital theory of education, which they see as having its origin in slavery, Wilson and Woock (1995, pp8-11) discuss the theory of economic rationalism that views education as a branch of social policy. In an Australian context, Taylor and Henry (1994, p105), refer to the creation of “an effective skilled and adaptive workforce ... as necessary for economic growth and recovery ... [but] this explicitly ‘human capital’ approach to education has been joined by ongoing assertions of the necessity to address the educational needs of specified disadvantaged groups”. It is contended by Lynch (1992, p14) that Irish education has also been guided for the past twenty-five years by the principles of human capital theory informed by technological functionalism, and argues that human capital assumptions are now part of the rhetoric of governments and the OECD.

Educational institutions receive varied signals from the DES and employers, some of which are diffuse and ambiguous. On the one hand, they argue for education to be geared more toward employable skills and competences that will be of immediate value to employers while, on the other, they argue for a broad education that facilitates problem solving ability (de Weert 1996, p30). Workers are required to learn employer-specific systems and skills rather than generic capabilities. The argument against this is the desirability for ability in the principles of problem solving and decision-making, broad intellectualism and associated theoretical capability. It is contended by Richardson (1993, p240) that employer interest groups and politicians have constructed a climate where there is a national concern about the need for education/training to respond to workplace skills requirements. McLean (1995, p2) refers to this as the politicians’ “parable of imminent doom”; they can construct a ‘truth’ or ‘spin’ about their policies.

National influences

Because of Irish government changes and a lack of political continuity in the DES from the early 1980s, policy development was rather dormant. Within the DES there was a sense that the legislation was not current enough. In the period from 1980 to 1993, there were ten different Ministers for Education; some were in office for very short periods and are unlikely to have made an impact on policy development. In the early 1980s some antipathy towards liberal arts degrees

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had surfaced on the basis that in a period of economic decline there was a need for more emphasis on science and technology disciplines (White 2001, p188-92). In the meantime, the economic effects of Reagan-Thatcherite policies had impacted on Ireland. The unemployment figure in 1987 stood at some 260,000, a peak of almost 17% of the labour force. It stood at 15.6% in 1991, and by 1999, it had fallen to 7.4% (Nolan *et al*, 2000).

The 1992 report from the Industrial Policy Review Group (IPRG) was a watershed in the context that it influenced proposals in an education Green Paper later that year, with its utilitarian emphasis in education and in reinforcing the binary structure of HE. The IPRG was critical of the education system and considered that the perceived skills' deficiency should be addressed both by industry and the education system. The report claimed that the most successful education and training systems are those where companies are involved in the development of programmes and where the curricula include on-the-job training. The IPRG report recommended the setting up of an agency to establish industry/HE linkages as a means of ensuring that industry needs were met (pp52-7).

Other influences informing the Irish policy direction

The EU (Maastricht) Treaty (1992) represented a process of European citizenship which began in 1985 with a European Commission White Paper that promised "the free movement of goods, services, people and capital" (EU, 1992). It brought the EC to a higher level of integration with the introduction of the Single Market from January 1993. The involvement of the Council of Ministers enabled the emerging Irish education and training intentions to be incorporated in the 1992 Green Paper (DES 1992, pp77-80). The objective of the Treaty was to promote economic and social progress through greater cohesion and the establishment of economic and monetary union. In Article 126 dealing with education, vocational training and youth, there is an emphasis on the development of quality education and encouraging mobility through the recognition of qualifications. Article 127 has the aim of facilitating adaptation to industrial changes, in particular through access to vocational training and retraining and stimulating co-operation between providers and employers.

The European Community (EC) was sensitive about intruding in education as it was zealously safeguarded by member states. However, since 1985 when the Treaty on European Union began to emerge, that changed considerably. The OECD, in addition to country reviews – again linking national and international influences – addressed a series of thematic studies focusing more on education than previously. Such studies formed a reference from which education ministers in OECD countries have drawn and ministers responded to commissioned position papers from the perspective of their own culture and tradition. The OECD acted as a policy reference for the DES since the 1960s and it was also consulted by Irish government officials during the 1990s. The OECD encouraged 'human capital' strategies for promoting economic prosperity, greater employment and social cohesion. However, OECD comparative data are generally statistical and fact-finding, and most of its comparative studies generate findings that are positivist in character through surveys and empirical and statistical data.

It was necessary for the DES to interpret the emerging Treaty articles for application locally and it is evident from the 1992 Green Paper's multiplicity of references to the OECD, EC and education and training practices in other countries that these provided a resource of different models to consider. International comparisons are often used by governments to legitimise

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radical changes in domestic policy, and Australia, NZ and the UK were important in this context. There was a flurry of education and training policy development in the countries under consideration and at EU and OECD levels from the late 1980s. Since then, governments in Australia, NZ and the UK identified a need to respond to global economic challenges and introduced a series of reforms to their education systems. The binary system of HE, which had existed in Australia since 1965, differentiated the 24 universities and the 47 colleges of advanced technology (CAEs) (Meek 1990, p283). However, in the late 1980s the government there decided, because of concerns about the relevance and effectiveness of the HE system, to abolish the binary system and establish a unified system that amalgamated universities and CAEs (Ministry of Education [Australia] 1989). For historic and geographic reasons, Irish education has close parallels with the UK. From the mid-1980s, though, conflicting policy signals were emerging from the latter. For example, the 1985 Green Paper, *The Development of Higher Education in the 1990s*, (DfE [UK], 1985) envisaged the continuation of the binary system, comprising polytechnics and universities, each with separate missions. However, within a few years this policy was reversed by the 1991 White Paper, *Higher Education: A New Framework* and the binary structure was abolished (DfE [UK], 1991).

In a coincidence of timing, the NZ government of the late 1980s undertook an ‘across the portfolio’ approach to the review of post compulsory education and training (Hawke, 1988). A working group which addressed the binary structure of education, defined the respective roles of the universities and the polytechnics, and recommended a national qualifications framework, led to new legislation within two years (Ministry of Education [NZ] 1990). Subsequent legislation reinforced NZ’s binary system of HE and greater responsibility was placed on providers to facilitate flexible movement within a range of learning outcomes (OECD 1998, p131). A qualifications framework in which all qualifications have a relationship to each other was implemented in 1990. The education and training developments in Australia, NZ and the UK took place during the late 1980s and early 1990s at the same time as the policy was developing in Ireland and provided interesting overseas comparisons. The Irish policy-makers had several approaches to choose from in relation to binary or unitary structures of HE, for example. NZ seemed to relate well to Ireland’s social and historical situation and ongoing networking encouraged this influence.

The 1992 Green Paper, 1993 Education Convention and 1995 White Paper

In Ireland, as elsewhere, there were cultural and ideological struggles in addressing education and training reforms. The 1992 Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, contained a number of broad educational aims but no stated philosophy. In the context of increasing integration and economic, monetary and political union within the EU, the Green Paper noted that: “Ireland’s education policies must make it clear that the modern world is a single entity, and many of its problems call for a global approach” (DES 1992, p75). Themes permeating the Paper related to obligations under the emerging Maastricht Treaty, which seem to have been interpreted by the DES as: utilitarianism in education, certification and qualifications framework arrangements; and governmental control through the ‘dual system’ (the so-called binary divide), and quality assurance. The utilitarian focus was represented by an emphasis on enterprise and individualistic values in contrast with a lack of emphasis on artistic and cultural aspects of educational development (Walshe 1999, p33). The Paper claimed that:

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it was generally recognised that the achievement of economic growth and industrial development depend ... on the availability of qualified personnel with the necessary technical and vocational skills and competences ... requiring a great level of flexibility in the labour force ... transferable skills [and] the development of knowledge, skills and competences. (DES 1992, pp. 109-113)

At HE level, the Green Paper proposed that all institutions develop a policy of linkages with industry (DES, p21). It linked economic growth and industrial development to the availability of personnel with the appropriate technical and vocational skills and competences – again there were connections to the IPRG findings. The Green Paper stressed the need for employer involvement in the development of vocational skills, and in the assessment/certification of the levels of skills and competences. The 1993 National Education Convention's timing coincided with the publication of several official reports and some of its findings appear to have been influenced by them. The *National Development Plan 1994-1999*, for example, suggested that economic success was reliant upon “a highly educated and skilled workforce and a continued growth in productivity” (Government of Ireland 1993, p77). This was a signal of support for the Green Paper's utilitarian emphasis at all educational levels. Another important influence was the National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) *Education and Training Policies for Economic and Social Development* (1993a), which stressed human resource development strategies:

Workforce skills and management – “human capital” – are widely seen as a key determinant of economic performance. The human capital perspective – which treats education and training as an investment and emphasises the direct impact of skill creation on productivity – has been prominent in recent developments in economic theory. (p18)

This report analysed education/training and economic performance in a number of EU countries, emphasising that “there is no conflict between strategies to promote skill development and economic growth” (p199). Supporting this view, the NESC report, *A Strategy For Competitiveness, Growth and Employment* (NESC 1993b, p494) expressed concern at the incoherence in education policy, which “has not been based on a complete or coherent view of the educational process, [that] ad hoc initiatives and schemes exist at all levels, [with] ... little linkage or continuity between them”. The EU report *The Challenge to European Education* (IRDAC 1994, p22) concurred with this view and stressed the need for education and training reform to meet the challenges of the changing employment environment. Following on from the Green Paper and the National Education Convention, a White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future*, was published in April 1995; it was driven more by economic needs than by a concern for the learner, as is illustrated by the following passage:

The development of the education and skills of people is as important a source of wealth as the accumulation of the more traditional forms of capital. National and international studies have identified the central role of education and training as one of the critical sources of economic well-being in modern society ... in shaping ... national competitiveness. Interlinked with these trends is the emerging economic necessity for life-long learning ... The contribution of education and training to economic prosperity has been underlined in ... independent studies. (p5)

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Among the studies were the 1994 EU White Paper, *Growth, Competitiveness and Employment* (EU, 1994) and the OECD reports *Education and Economy in a Changing Society* and the *Jobs Study – Facts, Analysis, Strategies* of (OECD, 1989 and 1994), all of which placed an emphasis on the value of a vocationally skilled and adaptable labour force (DES 1995a, p75). Coinciding with the White Paper's publication, a European White Paper, *Teaching and Learning*, called for “a more cohesive approach to the development of all vocational education and training to maximise the benefit to students, society and the economy” (EU 1995, p42). Ireland's Irish White Paper in outlining what it called the general acceptance of “the need for a more coherent and effective system of certification for the non-university sector of higher education”, proposed a new body, TEASTAS (Irish language word for certificate), with responsibility for:

- the certification of all non-university third-level programmes, and all further and continuation, education and training programmes;
 - the plans, programmes and budgets of the NCEA and the NCVA, which will be reconstituted as sub-boards of TEASTAS;
 - the national qualifications framework; and
 - the national authority for ensuring international recognition for all the qualifications under its remit.
- (p 83)

Arguing for the continuation of ‘system differentiation’, the emotive ‘binary system’ term was avoided just as it had been in the Green Paper, the White Paper reiterated the importance of the different missions and the diversity of the two sectors. It stated that the system “will be maintained to ensure maximum flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of students and to the wide variety of social and economic requirements” (DES 1995, p93). It emphasised outlined the importance of the course provision in the technological sector in addressing economic needs.

Policy networks and policy borrowing

During the period from 1988 to the mid-1990s, there were study visits to Ireland by visiting education and training delegations from a range of countries and these were reciprocated by Irish delegations. Such visits enabled the establishment of policy networks which were valuable in facilitating the consideration of other policy approaches. In borrowing policy from other countries, however, care is needed to ensure the appropriateness to the ‘borrowing’ country and in reconciling them with other national social policies. A former Secretary-General of the DES, observed that:

It was my view, in the context of us being a small country, that when embarking on a new policy initiative it is important to ascertain what is happening elsewhere. There is no shame in picking up good ideas from other countries. Of course these models must be viewed through your own lens; you cannot abstract away the differences. New Zealand was interesting to Irish policy-makers in a range of public policy areas because of issues of size and language. (Thornhill, interview with author)

NZ's policy was especially interesting to Irish policy-makers. Exchange visits continued during the 1990s, and representatives of TEASTAS visited NZ in 1996 to study its education/training legislation. Ireland did not have the same manufacturing base as the UK whose education and training experience was different, so it was not an especially relevant model. But some other European countries might well have been more relevant, although they do not appear to have been seriously considered by the DES. By 1996, ‘off-the-shelf’ qualifications frameworks

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adopted in Australia and NZ were available and UK framework proposals had also emerged. In 1995, the qualifications framework introduced in Australia provided for twelve levels with credits assigned, each allowing transfer from certificates of education in schools, certificate to advanced diploma in vocational education and training and HE levels from diploma to doctorate.

TEASTAS and the consultative process

TEASTAS was established on an interim basis in September 1995. Its purpose was to achieve co-ordination of qualifications outside the universities and to establish a qualifications framework. With the establishment of TEASTAS, the consultative process took on a greater momentum. TEASTAS viewed lifelong learning as an important component in the framework, and envisaged it linking with school and university qualifications, thus providing a national system through which student progression would be facilitated. TEASTAS identified quality assurance; accreditation; access, progression and mobility; and international recognition as issues to be addressed (p4). In a second report (DES 1997c) there was an emphasis on the need for “a *single* national basis for co-ordinating, evaluating and comparing the quality of awards and the various systems that produce them” (p1). In explaining its philosophical context, the report stated that:

a national frame of reference is fundamental to the achievement of access, progression and mobility for learners and ... a national basis for the comparability and recognition of awards. ... The resulting transparency will contribute to the continuous upgrading of the skills, knowledge and expertise of the population, which will be crucial for future economic wellbeing, social cohesion and personal development. (p1)

The aim of the then Minister for Education was to ensure that education and training providers worked closely with business interests, and stated that “human capital is being continually identified as one of the keys, if not the key, to our present prosperity” (p9). He also said the proposals were not simply as a “result of pressure from Brussels”, but had been part of the National Development Plan agreed with the EU (p12). However, the Minister’s comments do not reflect the undoubted influences of the EU, the OECD and the emerging Bologna Declaration (European Commission, 1999). The DES was a signatory to the latter which committed Ireland in the first decade of the third millennium to harmonise the architecture of European HE, and to:

- adopt a system of comparable degrees – a qualifications framework;
- establish a system of credits;
- promote mobility;
- promote co-operation in quality assurance; and,
- promote a European dimension and co-operation in higher education. (p2)

The 1999 Qualifications (Education & Training) legislation

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill was published in the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) where the Minister for Education commenced the Second Stage reading on 9 March 1999. In the context of its claimed learner focus, he outlined four principal aims of the Bill as follows:

- to establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill or competence;

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- to promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training;
- to provide a system for co-ordinating and comparing education and training awards; and,
- to maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression.

(Seanad Éireann, 1999)

The Bill established a National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) – the word ‘TEASTAS’ was dropped as it is identified in the Irish language as a certificate award and the use of it did not reflect the range of awards to be accommodated. There were to be two new councils – the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) – to take over the roles of existing awards bodies. Following the passing of the Act by the Irish Parliament the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established in February 2001; FETAC and HETAC were launched in June 2001. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) had the task of developing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications which was launched in October 2003. A ten-level structure contains 15 award types – from level 1 certificate to level 10 doctorate – for which descriptors were developed. The Authority engaged in a wide consultation process in developing the Framework and it has been well received by all the interest groups in Ireland, including the learners.

Conclusion

The Act highlights the growing instrumentalist influence in policy provision with education/training systems increasingly becoming an important tool for governments in economic development terms. It also highlighted human capital theory, which is based on the assumption that vocational education is a productive investment and a means by which societies can achieve sustainable economic growth. Clearly there were a range of national, European and international influences involved in formulating the policy direction that led to Ireland’s National Framework of Qualifications, but clearly no single model was paramount. However, NZ did provide an overseas example that fitted with the cultural and political precepts of education in Ireland. It is clear that policy formation is complex with many competing interests seeking to influence its direction.

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